

MALCOLM COWLEY

BLUE
JUNIATA



JONATHAN · CAPE · AND · HARRISON · SMITH
NEW · YORK

THESE poems of Malcolm Cowley are in a sense a landmark in modern American poetry. The product of an intense nature, they are the result of years of concentration and selection, representing the best, not of an easy flow of verse, but of a mind that formed them as if they had been hewn out of granite. Here is verse that reflects the almost sterile beauty of the Pennsylvania countryside; poems of passion; poems of the city and of the sea.

Mr. Cowley's critical work has for a long time established him as one of the clearest minds in the country; his translations from the French have won distinction for him as a remarkable prose writer; but not many people have been aware of the existence of the rare poetic talent which is illustrated in this book. *Blue Juniata* should take its place immediately among the most important offerings of the younger poets of America.

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BLUE JUNIATA

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BLUE JUNIATA

Poems

By
MALCOLM COWLEY



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To
WILLIAM AND JOSEPHINE
COWLEY
My Father and my Mother

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BOOK I

BLUE JUNIATA

Poems: 1919-1929

DEFINITIONS

Juniata: — *A river of west-central Pennsylvania, rising in Somerset County near the crest of the Alleghenies, making its way eastward through several mountain ranges, and falling into the Susquehanna after a tortuous course of about two hundred miles.*

Blue Juniata: — *A sentimental ballad popular toward the end of the last century. I remember the opening couplet:*

Wild roved an Indian girl, bright Alfarata,
Where sweep the waters of the blue Juniata.

✓
THE HILL ABOVE THE MINE

Nobody comes to the graveyard on the hill,
lost on the blackened slope above the mine,
where coke-oven fumes drift heavily by day
and creeping fires at night; nobody stirs
here by the crumbling wall, where headstones loom
among the blackberry vines; nobody walks
in the blue starlight under the cedar branches
twisted and black against the moon, nor speaks
except the unquiet company of the dead,

and one who calls the roll:

“Ezekiel Cowley?”

Dead.

“Laban and Uriah Evans?”

Dead.

“Jasper McCullough, your three wives, your thirty
children, of whom four bastards?”

Dead, all dead.

“Simon Eliot? Sergeant Danny George?
Judge Peter and Sarah Ellen Farbaugh?”

Dead,

sleeping under the brambles in the starlight
above the unpainted cabins and the mine.

What have you seen, O dead?

“ We saw our woods
butchered, flames curling in the maple tops,
white ashes drifting, a railroad in the valley
bridging the creek, and mines under the hill.
We saw our farms lie fallow and houses grow
all summer in the flowerless meadows. Rats
all winter gnawed the last husks in the barn.
In spring the waters rose, crept through the fields
and stripped them bare of soil, while on the hill
we waited and stood firm.”

Wait on, O dead!
The waters still shall rise, the hills fold in,
the tombs open to heaven, and you shall ride
eastward on a rain-wind, spurring the thunder,
your white bones drifting like herons across the moon.

CHESTNUT RIDGE

The Northern Turnpike winds
slowly over the flanks of Chestnut Ridge,
constricting slowly and like a snake the gauntness
of mountain barns.

Brown, gray, it is the color of a snake
turned on its back to die,

and yet was living once: stagecoaches wore
these ruts now choked with dusty weeds — the Mail,
three times a week for Pittsburgh and the West,
three times a week for Philadelphia. Listen
. . . the creak of harness on the eastern slope;
horses break to a gallop; hubs graze past
a boat-shaped wagon westward bound. A boy
rides to the mill, his balanced sack of wheat
on the saddle-horn; a shower of fine pebbles
forever rains against the dashboard, till
the sound dies away in chestnut trees.

At moments like this moment, time becomes
something barely perceptible, a point
centuries into the future, into a past
without memory, a dead and changeless moment.

Cows moo beside the spring; crows gather where
in the south field a plowman drives his furrow.

Before he drives another there will be
new peoples, wars, new multiples of death,
before the sun drops westward or the purple
deepens and fades on the chestnuts of the Ridge.

BLUE JUNIATA

Farmhouses curl like horns of plenty, hide
lean paintless shanks against a barn, or crouch
empty in the shadow of a mountain. Here
there is no house at all —

only the bones of a house,
lilacs growing beside them,
roses in clumps between them,
honeysuckle over;
a door, a crooked chimney,
mud-chinked, a yawning fireplace,
the skeleton of a pine;

a railroad thirty yards from the empty door.

I heard a railroad section-man playing on a jew's-harp,
Where is now that merry party I remember long ago?
Nelly was a lady . . . twice . . . Old Black Joe,
as if he laid a hand upon my shoulder,
saying:

“Your father lived here long ago;
your father's father built the house, lies buried
under the pine —”

Sing *Nelly was a lady*
. . . Blue Juniata . . . Old Black Joe.

For sometimes a familiar music hammers
like blood against the eardrums, paints a mist
across the eyes, as if the smell of lilac,
moss-roses and the past became a music
made visible, a monument of air.

MINE NO. 6

They scoured the hill with steel and living brooms
of fire, that nothing living might persist;
here crouch their cabins; here the tippie looms
uncompromising, black against the mist.

All day the wagons lumber past, the wide
squat wheels hub deep, the horses strained and still;
the headlong rain pours down all day to hide
the blackened stumps, the ulcerated hill.

Beauty, perfection, I have loved you fiercely
— even in this windy slum, where fear
drips from the eaves like August rain, and scarcely
a leaf sprouts, and a universe of pain
labors to bear its stillborn fruit — even here
. . . your long white cruel fingers at my brain.

LAUREL MOUNTAIN

Listen: we were working in the woods
on Laurel Mountain somewhere, and the rain,
against our roof that rusted, a windless rain,
dripped all night in the tangles of our hair.

All night the trickle of rain across our faces;
we covered the flour barrel with gunny-sacks
and still the rain soaked through them. In the morning
three men together left the cabin, marched

into the hemlock woods that smelt of rain.
(Three twisted men together in the woods,
two of them sawing a hemlock tree and one
who faced them chopping, till the axe-head broke,

split from the wet helve, and one man fell.)
Grunting he fell on his knees in the cold moss,
wiped blood away from his eyes, cursed God and died.
Reuben and Simeon: we were his two sons,

his tall sons twisted with their anger, cold
with hatred for his body. Spring was late.
Corn froze that year in June. The woods were bare.
We hollowed out a grave in the empty woods,

laid him among the hemlock roots face-down
and fetched a spray of dogwood for his hair,
I don't know why, then shovelled the dirt in,
burrowing with our hands and feet. The rain

beat steadily on our shoulders hunched in prayer
against a tall God like a hemlock tree,
his arms like crooked branches, his head bare,
his voice a cold rain dripping in the moss,
and hemlock needles tangled in his hair.

SEVEN O'CLOCK

At seven o'clock when tables have been cleared,
brushed free of crumbs and chairs set back,
the dishes scraped and washed and put away —

at seven o'clock the wives of Cherry Tree
come to their porches, take a rocking chair
and sway in rhythm, one, two, slippers tap
symmetrically, one . . . two . . . one.

Today the house was very hot, she said,
and Mabel said the house was hot today
and not a cloud in the sky, but a stormy moon
with the horns turned down, so maybe rain would fall
during the night. July, the windless month,
when only the hot breath of growing corn
seeps imperceptibly through the dusk, July
in the eighteen-seventies or nineteen-ten
or fifty years from now. Their chairs creak on,
one, two, and slippers tapping on the floor —

till at half-past nine,
there comes a sound of closing doors, of bolts
shot, and the sudden glow of lamps.

In all the valley houses at half-past nine,
shadows go crawling through the flowered hallways
and gingham rustles up a narrow stair.

THE WILLOW BRANCH

From the bulk of it,
from summer fields pegged flat beneath the sky,
from enormous sunlight beating down on them,
I hid myself away
under the water, under green water,
where silver fishes nibbled at my thighs,
saying:

“ We swam upstream for three days and three nights;
we drifted three days southward with the current,
and nowhere found a limit to the world.
It is shaped like a willow branch. No one can swim
to the tip.”

The fishes hid away beneath a stone.

PROCESSIONAL OF THE THIRD SEASON

The year proceeds now formally to his end
(cover him over, sprinkle the dead leaves over);
countrymen, neighbors, let us take the body,
making a shallow grave, and bury him
(plows and harrows and shovels and sixty horses).

We Strongstown men can lift a giant arm
of him, McFadden's Mills can bear the other,
and Cherry Tree and Nicktown having taken
a leg of him, our villages will march
with the dead year westward on the Stony Pike
(cover him over).

Plows and harrows and shovels and sixty horses
precede his body, after which are driven
turkeys in flocks, plump geese, a fattened steer,
three carts that overflow with sausages,
hams, pumpkins, sides of bacon, applejack
in kegs, the whitest flour, the yellowest cornmeal
and casks of cider. (Let his wake be merry,
and while the sunlight fades among the fields,
sprinkle the dead leaves over.)

Hollow a place for his head by the Dunkard church
(plows and harrows and shovels and sixty horses);

lay his feet by the meeting-house at Bethel;
bury his limbs eight inches deep in loam
from field to fertile field across the township.
Now shall we kill and roast the ox, now spit
the geese and turkeys, broach the casks of cider
in the dying sunlight, call the fiddlers, dance,
eat hugely, drink . . . over his grave will sprout
the first wheat to his memory in the spring.

Cover him over. Sprinkle the dead leaves over.

HICKORY COVE

Lost in a mountain valley, we have struggled
for bread too long. Here corn is sparse and blighted.
The valley is too narrow. We have driven
our plows against the stony flanks of the hill.

No use to struggle further, O my brothers;
here in our fields lie down together, rest,

and some day when the earth has grown as cold
as craters in the moon, when falls the sun
black through perpetual twilight, then our hills
will fold like wrinkles in a forehead, press
the valley out between them like slow fingers
against the thumb of Saturn, and provide
for us magnificent burial, my kin.

Cold hills already lie
staring down at our cornfields covetously.

THE FARM DIED

I watched the agony of a mountain farm,
a gangrenous decay:
the farm died with the pines that sheltered it;
the farm died when the woodshed rotted away.

It died to the beat of a loose board on the barn
that flapped in the wind all night;
nobody came to drive a nail in it.
The farm died in a broken window-light,

a broken pane upstairs in the guest bedroom,
through which the autumn rain
beat down all night upon the Turkey carpet;
nobody thought to putty in a pane.

Nobody nailed another slat on the corncrib;
nobody mowed the hay;
nobody came to mend the rusty fences.
The farm died when the two boys went away,

or maybe lived till the old man was buried,
but after it was dead I loved it more,
though poison sumac grew in the empty pastures,
though ridgepoles fell, and though November winds
came all night whistling through an open door.

DAN GEORGE

Old Dan George

chews tobacco, tips a broad-brimmed dusty
black felt hat and says,

“ I was top sergeant.

They killed the captain and the two lieutenants.

For eight months the company was mine.”

Sergeant Dan George, wounded at Chickamauga,
prisoner in Andersonville.

Dignity is an old man

dribbling tobacco on the yellow corners
of his moustache.

“ Listen, Dan George — your skin is china brown,
your eyes empty, your hands gentle and long
as a sea-mist falling — you ran away to fight,
cheated your neighbors, drank, had bastards, say? ”

“ Maybe. I can't remember. A long time ago.”

I used to find him in the Presbyterian
graveyard, limping slowly under the cedars,
spelling over a tomb:

“ Humpty Mert Miller,
ran a water sawmill in Pine Flats,

a hard man, a good hater, died fighting drunk:
bury me at his side."

Now Reverend Death, when he comes driving through
Cambria County in his black three-seated
surrey, whoaing at a farm to shout,
" Jump in, Eliza! Cain, jump in . . . there's room "
(nobody dares to answer him) —

when Death

in his black suit and clerical collar turns
into Dan George's lane, nobody speaks,
nobody moves but the old man chewing tobacco,
thinking of his friends.

Dan George climbed into the surrey, took the reins,

and somewhere was a noise of lamentation,
grief without bitterness, a quiet moan,
old lonesome women weeping in every farmhouse
west from Indian Meadows to Cherry Tree.

EMPTY BARN, DEAD FARM

Houses are incidents, barns four-square and warm,
with doors to swallow a wagonload of wheat,
with empty windows to let the pigeons in.

They used to say that Eliot's barn floor
was clean enough to eat your dinner off it;
he was a hard man, careful of his stock,
proud of his farm.

The last week in July, they threshed his wheat
behind the barn. Upstairs in the pink bedroom,
in the four-post bed, under the flowered quilt,
old Simon Eliot lay dying.

“ Move
the bedstead closer to the window. Prop
my head with pillows. Raise it higher. Go.
My back aches. I feel tired, dead tired.
I want to see the farm.”

The square back of the barn hid most of it.

He heard the roar of straw in the separator,
when belts ran slack the chut-chut of the tractor,
saw nothing, only the jutting end of the stacker
and straw that fell in a river from its tip;
straw falling as water falls,
chaff in a yellow mist.

His eyes were colored like new straw, and damp;
he wiped them with a corner of the sheet,
then saw his stubble fields beyond the barn,
farther the green of month-old buckwheat, farther
his woodlot ending in a ragged line.

It touched the house, almost, and hid the fields,
the time he drove here first, in a new wagon,
proud of his new wife, fifty years ago.

She dressed in printed cotton;
they owned a stumpy clearing,
ten acres, pine, a cabin
empty and windowless, no barn.

He hitched the horses to a chestnut root
and took a double handful of black loam,
sifted it through his fingers slowly, fetched
his axe from under the wagon-seat, and chopped
the tallest of the pines.

He was a hard man, and he made the farm,
working into the dusk to clear the fields,
sparing nobody, careful of his horses,
slowly buying more land as prices rose.
Next spring he'd plow the valley fields for corn,
and hills for clover to keep the soil from washing.

Hogs to fatten. Corn would be going higher.

He suddenly understood that he would do nothing of the sort, that corn and clover would grow by natural laws and harvest come without his supervising.

“Bob will have it all;
Bob is flighty. . . .
He’ll tear up everything to suit himself;
he’ll finish nothing.
Bob is lazy.
The farm will go to sticks.”

He saw the fields and felt that he was wrong.

“Bob is like all the other Eliots.
He’ll settle down.
The farm is stronger than all the Eliots.
The farm will keep on growing and me dead.

“Tell him to buy a tractor. The barn wants shingled.”

He heard the dinner bell;
the engine grumbled a moment,
the belt creaked and was still.

And suddenly old Eliot was seized
with a swift fury to annihilate
his past, to starve the horses in their stalls,
to fire the woodlot, mow the buckwheat green,
poison the well, tear down the barn, plant corn
on the steep hillside, so the summer rains
would wash away the soil, and so the farm
he once created with his living hands
by two dead hands might be destroyed. He prayed,
“Christ, O merciful Christ, give me the strength.
There’s matches on the mantelpiece. The straw
is dry as powder.”

He strained upwards, clenched his chalky hands
as if they held the farm. His face went white.
His head fell slowly back upon the pillow,

which Annie had embroidered with an E
in purple cotton, and she brought it out
for special occasions only. People said
she was a grand good housewife, Simon was
a hard man, wealthy, but a poor provider,
rough and blaspheming, only loved his land.
Pity the wicked. Empty barn, dead farm.

The way he was taken off, it was a judgment.

· EPITAPH

Zebulon Lansendorfer,
born on the Susquehanna,
bully of Laurel Mountain,
hurt in a brawl;

Noah Mackenzie, preacher
eleven years in Bethel,
eighteen years in Nolo,
two months in Cherry Tree —

lately deceased. The snows are white above them;
the first flowers of spring are white above them;
their bones are white, scoured by the waters of time.

DAY COACH

I

Tickets, please, tickets! ”

He settled back, please tickets, in the seat,
his senses numb, his memories congealed,
his eyes unseeing, tickets please, his body
warm in the overcoat of solitude.

Strangers came brushing past him down the aisle
and only soiled the fringes of his mantle.

He turned to watch the hills
weave up and down like rapid, green, ungraceful
dancers against the curtain of his eyes;
to watch the houses mingle, and his breath
a moving mist that crept across the pane.

II

He says, “ It is the placing of the foot
upon the step, the gesture to a porter,
the kiss at parting and the high procession
with baggage up an aisle:
these are the acts that constitute
the act of travel.

“ Altoona, Johnstown, Pittsburgh,
are cities pimpled on hills;
Columbus is a whistle in the night,
New York a woman corseted with rivers.

“ You climb into the smoker, give a tip,
open the Herald, strike a match, puff once;
smoke drifts among the trees; geography
flows past the window; now a whistle blows;
your knees straighten; a porter takes your bag —

“ The hills and fields of Pennsylvania tremble
behind you dimly, the landscape of a dream.”

III

As the Limited swept by, he looked through the plate glass of the dining car — the other — and saw a fork suspended in the air, and before it had finished its journey he was staring into a smoking car with four men playing cards on a suitcase clamped to their knees. A world, an atom and a universe, as seen under the microscope; a world in an envelope sealed with a red tail-light that solemnly moved past him up the track; a world sealed out of his own world and living for thirty-five seconds of his life.

IV

The bell that suddenly greets us at a crossing
and dies as suddenly — somewhere this bell
rings on for other trains.

A girl stands waving toward us in a doorway;
down a hillside children run to meet us;
a man fishes in a muddy river;

they disappear. Somewhere the handkerchief
still waves against the train; children still play,
and I, if I descended from the train,
should live eternally in these brief towns
that overhang a momentary river.

V

The lights of the train now move
transversely across the water;
across the water strides
the shadow of the engineer;
the square barred windows move across the water
as if they marked a prison that exists
never between four walls, but only moves
continually across a world of waters.

VI

Time is marked not by hours, but by cities: we are one station east of Altoona, one station west of Altoona; Cresson — change cars for Lockett, Munster and all points on the line that runs crookedly back into a boyhood, with the burden of a day dropping like ripe fruit at every revolution of the driving wheel, with a year lost between each of the rickety stations: Ebensburg, Beulah Road, Nant-y-glo; gather your luggage and move it toward the door. TWIN ROCKS.

VII

O travellers, with you
I moved like a firefly over twilight waters;
with you I was spit
from the tunnel's puckered lips like a cherry seed;
with you I blindly plunged into seas of light.

Travellers, come!

and we shall join our hands,
dance to old music, *Farmer in the dell*
and *London Bridge is falling down*, once, twice,
around our faithful locomotive.

Come!

(The others — will they join us from their cabs
and tenders, from the roundhouse, from the tower,

and from the red caboose that sleeps behind
a string of empty freight-cars, where a lantern
gathers the whole of night in one pale flame?)

VIII

Out of the group that waited, not one form
detached itself to meet him;
the circle of their backs was a wall against him.

Oblongs of light reflected from the train
gleamed along the mountainside and vanished;
a whistle drifted eastward with the wind.

He buttoned his coat, marched off into the darkness,
which step by step preceded him, until
he seized and wrapped it three times round his
shoulders;

bending his shoulders under the weight of darkness,
he stumbled on with his burden of stars and hills.

THE CHESTNUT TREES ARE DEAD

We will make our way out of the city. Come!

It is too late now.

I know a place where blue grass, orchard grass,
red clover, timothy and white clover
are tangled in an orchard, and juneberries
ripen and fall at the deep edge of the woods.

Crowds, turbines, unremembered time:
it is too late now.

Since unremembered time the ferns have grown
knee-deep, and moss under the chestnut trees
hiding the footprints of small deer. We ran,
do you remember, trampling ferns to reach
a spring that issued from the chestnut roots
in a bright stream, then traced it through the laurel,
crossing burned ground where briars held us back
with their skinny hands, and crashing down a hill
headlong to find —

It is too late now, too late:
we have lived a great while here and no moons rise.
The juneberries will be withered on the branches,
the chestnut trees are dead.

BOOK II

THE ADOLESCENT

Poems: 1919-1920

NOTE

After the war, we drifted to New York, to the district south of Fourteenth street, where one could occupy a hall bedroom for two or three dollars weekly and rent the unfurnished top floor of a rickety dwelling for thirty dollars a month. There were two schools among us: those who painted the floors black (they were the last of the æsthetes) and those who did not paint the floors. Our college textbooks and the complete works of Jules Laforgue gathered dust on the mantelpiece among a litter of unemptied ash-trays. The streets outside were those of Glenn Coleman's early paintings: low, red-brick, early nineteenth-century houses, crazy doorways, sidewalks covered with black snow, and in the foreground, an old woman bending under a sack of rags.

In this setting of dirt and poverty, we passed our post-graduate, post-bellum years, scantily clothed, poorly fed, making drafts against our abundant constitutions, and enjoying ourselves almost feverishly. For, there was much in our surroundings that agreed with our mood. We had been born with illusions, unlike the present generation, but having lost them at a very early age, we felt the need of replacing them with others; and we had come to erect the sordid into a kind of religion. We worshipped the cluttered streets, the overflowing ash-

cans, the houses full of people and rats; we felt something like veneration for the barrooms then in the last months of their legal existence; and our writings, too, had the smell of sawdust, youth, squalor and Luke O'Connor's beer-and-stout. They had other qualities that were more questionable — a sort of crooked sentiment, a self-protective smirk — yet in a way I respect their emotions, and I like to think that the boy of twenty, the dead adolescent who wrote these seven poems and fifty others like them, has the right to be heard today among his elders and his heirs.

KELLY'S BARROOM

Always I felt a love for sordid things,
alleys and courtyards, airless tragedies,
whispers in closets, poverty, amours
in the live darkness, swift and sinister.

These gangs parading, drunken, pale, these girls
who meet their kind like cats in areaways,
these cluttered streets of theirs, and filthy rooms,
and death around the corner I have found
voluptuous.

The crowd is here tonight;
the nickel-in-the-slot piano plays
Oh, take me back, please take me back to — where
do broken-voiced pianos hope to go?
A floozie sobs tonight, "I'm lonely, please,
Arthur, give me a drink, I'm awful lonely,"
and Arthur humming as he mops the bar.

Tonight I too am lonely for the soil:
Oh, take me back, please take me back — to home,
innocence, the family, marriage, these
ancestral dreams, these melodies of the race.

YOUNG KUPPENHEIMER GODS

Zelda the manicure strolls on beside
her lover, who is working on the Street;
they talk in broken phrases, while the tide
comes sedulously licking at their feet,

then creeps away. She sends her glances roving
among the bathers, judging every feature;
this is a place, she thinks, for pleasant loving,
not too uncomfortably close to nature,

and rich in social graces. Marching by
are Kuppenheimer gods in bathing suits,
upholstered queens and flappers bare of thigh —
sand filters into patent-leather boots;

the sun beats down on painted cheeks; the sea
growls at the littered beach complainingly.

NOCTURNE

Mother has washed the dishes, limped upstairs;
Mother has disappeared into the light;
porches are filled where wicker rocking chairs
creak . . . through the emptiness of night
. . . creak . . . scrape, as if they would repeat
the chorus of the daughters of the street:

*“Hamburg steak for dinner, runs in our hose,
nobody speaks of them, everybody knows;
meeting me at twilight he handed me a rose:
will he come?”*

“Will he come with gallant eyebrows, chestnut hair;
will he come and rock beside me in the chair;
will he press my fingers neatly, say discreetly,
life is real,
life is true, will he tell its every secret,
but discreetly,
having realized how sacredly I feel?”

Let me tiptoe through the darkness, boldly whisper,
“He will come:
he will come and take your hand,
swiftly choosing you for queen;
he will drive you to the wedding in his limousine;
he will tell you life is true, and understand
what only you and he can understand.”

Through the night her sticky hand
reaches out and touches mine.

"It is you that understand,
it must be you."

"No, I'm sorry."

"But it's true,
true . . . that you beside me in the chair
will tell me all of life and how to play,
will ask me for my hand —"

I shall say
. . . what shall I say?

"Your folk are stronger than mine,
being less bold;
your arms are stronger than mine,
willing to hold;
your faith is stronger than mine,
founded on lies;
my faith is no longer mine,
but melts away in your eyes,
in the syrup of your eyes.
I can never belong to you."

And she: "It is not true."

My words have tapped like pebbles
in the dry well of her mind.

She only smiles and echoes,
"It is not true. You are unkind."
Or else she answers nothing of the kind.

She will say nothing, and I . . . nothing,
only to kiss her fingers, slip away
past willow rockers creaking in the darkness;
if willow chairs could speak, these would say:

*"He will come, don't despair,
oval smiles and chestnut hair:
he will come."*

THE RUBBER PLANT

Can you see their angular shadows on the blind?

If ever the rubber plant
ceased to project the crossbars of its leaves
against the cord portières;
if the gilt clock no longer
spied down upon them from the mantelpiece
and folding doors were suddenly flung open,
they could take hands and stride out regally
into —

Yes, that is it exactly,
at least it is possible.

' FREE CLINIC

I

Rows of soiled faces parallel
the benches, which in turn
parallel the reception desk,
run perpendicular to the drug
counter, and are bisected by
an aisle that stops
at a given
point.

In another world are tangents, arcs,
chords, ovals . . . but the aisle
which parallels the wall bisects
the room and at a given point
stops.

II

Mrs Magrady,
gray hat, gray dress, gray
dirty quivering flesh:
she is dumped on the seat
like a barrel of ashes.

What
ever can be the matter with you
today, Mrs Magrady?

III

God is an old woman
with dropsy —
or perhaps
you were not created
in His image?

IV

About the progress of a fly
up these funereal walls there is a
Something
 (one remembers
Caesar marching through a burned city
alone).

V

In a circle of perfume,
two shopgirls, one with a rose
stuck in a ragged buttonhole, and one
with a petalled sore.

“It ain’t my fault, honest, Doctor.”

VI

Against a colorless skin, the brazen
 loveliness of a tumor,
fistula, chancre, chancroid —
 it is not
because I admired their beauty,
 no, tormented
by the white search for the absolute,
by the nostalgia of the immaculate
conception . . . I therefore

DEATHBED

In an empty house there should have been women
crying
and footsteps hushed and echoing. Instead
I found him in a cold fourth-storey bedroom,
his face gone suddenly pale under the gaslight,
his legs stretched long and awkward on the bed.

I took his hand; it was moist and cold like a frog;
his eyes were fixed in a stare against the wall.
I turned away to leave him very softly;
the door slammed shut behind, and a procession
of echoes stalked before me down the hall.

And every hand I met was raised against me;
the hands were cold and accused me and I fled
down hostile streets where lamps were still unlighted
and woke at night in my own unlighted bedroom,
lying as still and awkward as the dead.

INTERMENT

We have lived too long together in this room,
too long in windless exile from the meadows;
boredom tonight is lurking in the shadows;
he spies on us from the gloom.

From where he is lying in wait outside the door,
he will slip the lock and enter when we go out;
there find our love that we had thought so holy
and take him by the throat and choke him slowly,
leaving him dead on the floor.

We too shall find him later, calm in death,
his white face turned to meet us;
we shall not weep, but rather hold our breath,
expecting him once more to rise and greet us.

The room at that will seem to be vast and empty,
tenanted only by table and bed and chair,
and we shall rip the pine boards of the flooring
and make a place for him and lay him there.

Not looking at each other, we shall hide him,
smoothing the wrinkled carpet as before.
(The unborn ghosts that huddle in the corners,
and you and I shall be the only mourners,
and you will turn, going silently out the door.)

BOOK III

VALUTA

Poems: 1921-1923

NOTE

In the years from 1920 till 1924, old Europe, that continent of hierarchies and values, had ceased to have any values whatsoever: it had only prices, which changed from country to country, from village to village, and especially from day to day. I can remember banquets in Germany that cost a nickel (or was it eight cents?) and packages of cigarettes that were purchased with the price of a week's lodging.

These new conditions produced a new race of tourists, the Valutaschweine, the profiteers of the exchange, who wandered from France to Rumania, from Italy to Poland, in search of the lowest prices and the most picturesque upheavals of society. Indifferent to the past of Europe, they were seen more often in fashionable hotels than in museums, more often in night-clubs than in picture galleries; but especially they could be seen in the railway station at Innsbruck: Danes, Hindus, Yankees, South Americans, wine-cheeked Englishmen, still more Yankees, all of them waiting for the international express that would bear them toward the falling paper-mark or the unstabilized lira.

It was my fortune to live for two years among these pilgrims of the pound-sterling and the dollar. I saw a chaotic Europe that was feverishly seeking the future of art and economics. I saw the picturesque rather than

the enduring. And I wrote poems from day to day, sometimes in a great chilly hotel-room in Tyrol, sometimes in a French pension, sometimes in Berlin, crouching beside a porcelain stove and listening to the roars outside that came, perhaps, from a mob. I have ceased to value many of these poems; their emotions and their technique are too impermanent. They still impress me, however, as having a certain documentary importance, and as marking a chapter in the history of our wandering, landless, uprooted generation.

VALUTA

Following the dollar, ah, following the dollar, I learned
three fashions of eating with the knife, and ordered
beer in four languages from a Hungarian waiter
while following the dollar eastward along the 48th
degree of north latitude — where it buys most, there
is the Fatherland —

following the dollar by gray Channel seas, by blue seas
in Italy, by Alpine lakes as blue as aniline blue, by
lakes as green as a bottle of green ink, with ink-
stained mountains rising on either hand;

I dipped my finger in the lake and wrote, *I shall never
return, never, to my strange land,*

my land where plains are daily stretched, where forests
burn in business hours daily, where yellow name-
less rivers run and where

cities stand daily on their heads to wave proud legs in
the air;

my land of cowboys, business men, of peddlers ped-
dling appliances to boil an egg three minutes, ex-
actly three minutes, and one born every minute in
my land

incomprehensible and sweet and far, where Douglas
Fairbanks weds our winsome Mary, and taking the
Bronx Express they sail away, far, far away, into a
photographed bliss I never could understand.

Four angels bathed in glory guard my land:

at the north gate Theodore Roosevelt, at the south gate
Jack Johnson, at the west gate Charlie Chaplin,
and

at the middle gate a back-country fiddler from Clarion
County fiddling, with a turkey in the straw and a
haw, haw, haw, and a turkey in the hay and I shall
never hear it fiddled, ah, farther than Atlantis is
my land,

where I could return tomorrow if I chose,

but I shall return to it never;

shall never wed my pale Alaska virgin,

never lie in thine arms, O Texas Rose.

SUNRISE OVER THE HEITERWAND

The house was full of light,
so full of light it bulged at every window,
and when he opened the door,
what was the music rippling down the pathway,
what laughter that pursued him through the gate?

The enchanted smile of Circe has lost its cunning.

Oh, to escape from these dominical
vulgaritys, the laughter of the Jewess
in my pursuit, the phonograph that plays
Weine nicht, Liebchen and *The Swanee Shore*:
climb, climb the mountain into another air.

He left the siren's house at nightfall, climbed
all night, skirting the brink of precipices
(the fog hid them) and leaping the crevasse.
The vegetation changed as he rose higher,

poplars giving place to beeches,
beeches giving place to larches,
larches giving place to meadows,
meadows blanching into snow.
Climb farther, climb.

Above the last sparse meadows among the snow,
there hides the flower I chose for my device,
excelsior, among the snowdrifts hidden,
blooming and fading in snowdrifts, edelweiss.

I plucked an edelweiss;
I held the flower proudly between my lips,
standing alone on the highest precipice,
baying aloud to the moon.
Suddenly I found her at my side.

The moon took refuge under the Heiterwand.

Whose was the moment of grim ecstasy
among the snows, when over the Heiterwand
burst forth the crimson, unexpected sun?
And whose the blood that stained the snow at dawn?

White. No word spoken. A thunder in the dawn.

She was gone suddenly, floating into space.
The gulf was bottomless. I leaped to follow.

And silently, as feathers drop, he fell,
he floated down past layer after layer
of vegetation, larches, poplars, farther,
descending faster and faster, he sees the palm,
the baobab, the banyan heavy with creepers
and creeping snakes over the dead lagoon.

It was beside the dead lagoon he died.

The angel horde takes flight: what hands are lifting
him, and who has seized the four bruised members,
and who has taken the head?

They are swinging him ever upwards and they are singing
hymns to his praise in honor of the dead.

They are singing angel hymns in ancient Hebrew: he
sings their hymns in Hebrew as he rises, *miariz*,
out of the land of Egypt rising, *mizraim*, out of
the house of bondage rising, out of these desolate
marshes rising to sing, and rises ever

into that rarer ether which is breathed by mortal lips,
by mortal lungs, ah, never.

MARIZIBILL

Along the High Street of Cologne,
evenings she used to come and pass,
offered herself for all to own,
then tired of walking streets, she drank
all night in evil bars, alone.

Her trinkets were in pawn to buy
clothes for a pimp with orange hair
(he was a Jew, tight-lipped and wry,
who coming from Formosa found
her in a brothel at Shanghai).

People I've known of every sort:
they do not fit their destinies,
but wander aimless, drawn by wires;
their hearts yawn open like their doors;
their eyes are half-extinguished fires.

*(From the French of Guillaume
Apollinaire)*

MEDITERRANEAN BEACH

Under a multitude of suns,
the sand turns molten white and stabs
the soles of all the naked feet
that move across the beach like crabs.

Over the feet are rudely piled
mountainous bellies, breasts in billows.
Triangular uncovered hams
shine white beneath red beach-umbrellas.

The sky is prudent and demure,
checked blue and white, a dimity,
it watches crimson bathing suits
affront the cobalt of a sea

where bathers hop across the waves
agilely, aimlessly, like fleas.
This is, if you consult a map
the sea that washed the shores of Greece,

from which came riding on the spume
Venus Anadyomene,
and other Venuses descend
up to their, in a word, the sea.

It smells much less of salt than sweat:
give me a salt-sweaty kiss,
Serena, take my hand and wade
into the sea.

ANGELICA

Translucent fingers on the yellow keys,
the shadow of a smile upon her lips,
Angélique plays . . .

“Lovely, these rhapsodies!”
we say, drinking our tea in noiseless sips.

“What tone she has, what soul!”
“How she must work, and how her hands are clever!”
Although you still embroider for your hope-chest,
say Angélique, and though your fragrant hair
is soft as lilacs beside you in a bowl,
they will never marry you, never.

In the gilt mirror, the corners of your eyes,
see, they already are
drawn in too-fragile patterns like your laces.
The young men died in the war.

Lamenting them forever,
your hands will forever drone across the keys
like wind among the bamboos, harmonies
heard dimly like a tinkle of distant cow-bells.
It ceases never;

the last chord will never be resolved,
but always it will hang in dusty corners
behind closed doors that nevermore swing back;
empty the house will be of guests and mourners;
only yourself among the bric-a-brac,

only yourself will live among the echoes
to watch the web of delicate lines that spread
from day to day, encroaching on your smile;
to watch the lilac nimbus leave your head,
and fingers yellowing like ivories,
and they will set you on the mantelpiece
to keep a faithful watch over your dead.

Beside a bowl of artificial fruit,
beside a clock that never strikes the hours,
or maybe strikes in other centuries,
you will be set upon the mantelpiece,
a flower in a wax bouquet of flowers.

THE CAST-IRON PANTHERS

I said, "The moon is obviously a boat
that rocks in the sunken pool as the waters swell;
let us tiptoe hand-in-hand to the moon and float
inside its rim, as in a coracle.

"Look how she sways," I said, "like a ballet dancer
who pirouettes to the edge of the stage and back;
we are watching the moon's rehearsal."

Came no answer;
her eyes fixed me and held me in their track.

"I am held," I said, "by the sanity of eyes
from becoming God or a chattering baboon;
from burning the peacock yews, which otherwise
would shade the cast-iron panthers from the moon;

"from the sight of the waning moon, which in July
is mirrored in the metal eyes of the panthers;
they follow it down the alleys of the sky,
till finding a water poisoned by ailanthus,

"a pool like this one, black against the moon,"
I said.

Her steel eyes held me in their track.
I might have gone quite mad, and like the panthers
have followed the moon.

Her cold eyes held me back.
Her eyes were fixed, insane, like mine and the panthers'.

CHÂTEAU DE SOUPIR: 1917

Jean tells me that the Senator
came here to see his mistresses,
and having passed the gilded door,
was ushered regally — Jean says —
past genuine Flemish tapestries,
velvets and mahoganies,
to where the odalisque was set,
the temporary queen, Odette.

. . . An eighteenth-century château
rebuilt to meet his lavish taste,
painted and gilt fortissimo;
the Germans, grown satirical,
had hidden a machine-gun nest
underneath the banquet hall.

The trenches run diagonally
across the alleys and the lawns,
and jagged wire from tree to tree;
the lake is desolate of swans;
in tortured immobility,
the deities of stone or bronze
await a new catastrophe.

Phantasmagorical at night,
yellow and white and amethyst,

the star-shells burn, and Verey lights,
and silent waters of the mist
submerge the landscape, till we feel
like drowned men, tragical, unreal.

And recent ghosts appear: Odette,
in skirt ballooning at the hips,
tosses a hasty kiss and slips
away to taunt the Senator
who, strong with marc and anisette,
his red beard wagging in the wind,
pursues her like a matador.

The mist creeps riverward. A fox
barks underneath a blasted tree.
An enemy machine-gun mocks
this ante-bellum comedy
and then falls silent, while a bronze
Silenus, patron of these lawns,
stands riddled like a pepper-box.

CARNAVAL IN PROvence

O masked ladies, excited with your dancing,
exhaling *Quelques Fleurs* and your own perfume,
intruders, why disturb the smoky quiet
that broods above this room?

Why do you rouse the waiter without pity?
why does your laughter make me younger and older?
Why do your eyes declare that they are pretty
(beauty would calm me) and why throw confetti
to settle on the broadcloth of my shoulder?

I think I was contented till you came.

Why do you stare at me,
making desires appear
real under dominoes?
Why do your lips uncloseth
mercilessly?
I shun their honesty.

Abruptly why disturb my meditation?
Outside the drizzle deepens into rain;
go, order up a bottle of champagne,
letting your masked eyes still play over me.

If once we were abandoned to each other
in some close-smelling room above the bar,
we could look out the window in the evening
after the rain, and see some rain-washed star
wrung clean as our exhausted bodies are.

Wisdom is passion's fruit.
I am too proud, too timid;
but know there is a secret, an abstraction,
call it a soul, beneath a business suit;

a something that takes flight when evening falls
out of the chatter and smoke of this café,
alone, to watch the day
stretch out sleepily on the hill beyond the Public
Garden;
to watch a sunset fade on stucco walls,
and twilight harden,
and gas-lamps nod like yellow parasols
under the sycamores, and bats take wing.

The equestrian statue of Louis, the Sun-King,
stares at an arch erected in his honor.

TWO SWANS

One morning during Carnaval they found two swans
in the Public Garden, their long necks twisted, two
swans lying splendidly dead under a magnolia

not yet in blossom, and nobody ever knew why they
were killed, whether it was a drunkard, whether
an old man tired of women's bodies, wishing to
destroy

a more impeccable beauty, or was he young (over them
bends a domino, black with white moons for but-
tons, while the sky like a domino bends more
vastly over).

It was a crime of passion; if I have read

of other passionate crimes in curtained alcoves, knife or
poison, they were less splendid than these two dead
swans, ah, less magnificent than the formal pool,
empty without them, the empty pool that stares

fixedly into a fixed and empty sky.

THE STARLINGS

Starlings wheel and descend at nightfall, choosing
maybe a bamboo copse or a cedar of Lebanon.
They cross the face of the winter sun like a smoke.

A cloud of descending starlings: it takes the shape successively of a ball, a cane, a mandolin — or rather a guitar — a string of frankfurters, a candy-poke, finally a balloon that collapses with a rush of escaping gases;

out of the center of a cloud is heard the twittering of birds.

THREE HILLS

There is a charm that pleases some
about these gardens that are squares
of peppermint candy edged with walls,
where grapevines grow against the walls
and stunted fruit trees, pear and plum,
each fruit plucked off before it falls;

there is a beauty I have seen;
today I much prefer to question,
tired of a too, too brilliant green,
too brilliant whites against the green;
maybe their plums have given me
a mild attack of indigestion;

at least my stomach turns against
geometry and rows of plum trees,
wanting a country where briars rout
under the non-Euclidean gum trees,
an unprecise, untutored country
with gardens growing inside out.

In my own country, the pine trees grow
at the edge of the woods,
in the heart of the woods,
wherever the wind may plant them,

never assembled, row by row,
in space that men could grant them;
in my own country, chestnut trees
bear and blossom where they please.

About my country, nothing grand:
three gothic hills in lower-case,
two valleys that would fit your hand,
a cross-road store, a church, a school
standing no higher than your face,
a trout stream — so I catalogue
the magic of my country —
item, a grove of hickory,
item, a ruined factory,
item — damn my memory,
you can imagine the rest.

But sometimes when the candles sputter,
their trees, disordered by the utter
timelessness of midnight, wail
like those of my own country;

and sometimes when in bed I see
three hills against the canopy,
three mischievous little hills that lie
side by side in a narrow bed,
tossing their feet against a muslin sky.

BOOK IV

THE CITY OF ANGER

Poems: 1924-1928

NOTE

When the exiles straggled home at last, they were met by no reporters, no cameramen, no official committee of welcome. The police launch lay moored to its dock, and the pigeons fed peaceably in City Hall Park. Broadway was empty of ticker tape. However, as we drove toward our anonymous lodgings, a dozen old newspapers flapped like banners of greeting in the autumn wind.

We unpacked our luggage, slept, and emerged on the morning streets. Allagazam, allagazam, the great show is about to begin. The fire-trucks dizzily skidding, the journey through mammoth caves, the song of riveting hammers, the death-defying leap from beam to beam on the fortieth storey. Allagazam, step up. See the genuine gangsters, the old pretzel women, the ghetto, the African village, the business men dictating to three stenographers and a dictaphone. Come out with the crowd, tonight, aw, be a sport. Buy the elixir of happiness, only fifty cents at any bar. Step up, allagazam. . . . He's crooked, I tell you. They're all crooks in this game. Don't listen to the guy, he'll gyp you. . . .

New York, inhabited by six million strangers, is the metropolis of curiosity and suspicion. It is the city without landmarks, the home of lasting impermanence, of dynamic immobility. It is the seat of violent emotions,

hate, desire, envy and contempt, all changing from moment to moment, all existing at the tips of the nerves. It is the city of anger . . . but underneath this anger is another mood, a feeling of timeless melancholy, dry, reckless, defeated and perverse.

THE NARROW HOUSE

To K.B.

I found a seed and planted it.
A tree sprang up; I tended it,
through the dry summers watered it;
the apples ripened in the fall.

I broke the apples open and I found
the bitter ash of days.

The garden was rich and blighted;
thorns overran the wall.
I watched an empty calendar.

Wait,
wait!

(Something is waiting and hidden,
magnificent kisses, everlasting fame,
around the corner of next week, between
the edges of two days.)

Wait only:

I shall heap your lap with pears,
oranges, nectarines and rubies;
about your neck a chain of afternoons,
your head crowned with forgetfulness.

To wait

. . . a tense man in a narrow house,
waiting without memory or hope,
asking for much, too much, expecting nothing.

A rain of days like ashes out of the sky.

LEONORA

To P.B.C.

I

Allagazam,
the princess with bobbed hair who rides
the rump of the bay mare;
allagazam, the gilded charioteers,
the pink hyena and also a little girl
making water behind the lilac bushes —

allagazam,
the Princess said and opened
her arms. Her eyes said, Take me.
But I am in love, *Madame*,
with three eccentric dancers.
The steam calliope
played Annie Laurie.

Allagazam,
allallagazam,
see the Fat Lady,
see the Bearded Lady,
see the Lady with Two Heads,
only Twenty-five Cents,
only the Fourth Part
of allagazam.

Allagazam, our world is either
measured too large, or we
too epical for the day;
who is your tailor?
What is the time, Mr. Cowley,
by last year's calendar?

II

Leonora, I inhabit an apartment:
bath, kitchenette, electric, telephone,
hot water, steam and hardwood flooring. Come!
I am here alone.

I will show you in an album, Leonora,
my relatives who died long ago,
also a genuine photograph of Jesus
blessing communion bread by radio.

In the morning I will make you toast and coffee,
Leonora, I will do the shopping later;
I will carry you asparagus in a taxi,
my heart on the dumbwaiter.

Leonora O'Mara, my bowels yearn after you:
I will serve you my kidneys on a toaster,

my brain in a chafing dish,
my hand on a wicker tray —
Leonora la mina, O nora malina —
but Leonora wailed and went away.

III

I met her in Chicago and she was married —
dance all day;
leave your man, Sweet Mamma, and come away;
manicured nails and kisses, to dance all day, all day —
how it was sad. . . .

Please, Mr. Orchestra, play us another tune.

*My daddy went and left me and left the cupboard bare;
who will pay the butcher bill now Daddy isn't there?*

Shuffle your feet.

*Found another daddy and he taught me not to care,
and how to care;*

found another daddy that I'll follow anywhere.

Shuffle your feet, dance,

dance among the tables, dance across the floor,
slip your arm around me, we'll go dancing out the door,
Sweet Mamma, anywhere, through any door:
wherever the banjos play is Tennessee.

BUY 300 STEEL

To M.J.

Buy 300 steel at the
market, buy 300 steel
at the market, buy 300
steel.

His face melted into the telephone,
his lips curled with hello, and dreamed
his vulcanized-rubber eyes,

with a hello . . . there was a lake beneath
the Bowling Green 6000 trees,
and hello, Bowling Green, the noise of waters

under a curdled sky, hello,
I dove into the lake, hello,
into the lake as green, hello,
as Mr. Kahn, hello, hello,
as green as Bowling Green.

I'll make a note of it, good-by, and rain
suddenly falling, down fell railways, coppers,
motors, industrials, Rebecca Steel,

Erie, Montgomery-Ward and Chrysler falling,
rain steadily falling, public utilities
. . . always a good buy,

a good, I'll make a note of it,
buy, good-by, good-by.

THE FLOWER IN THE SEA

To H.H.C.

Jesus I saw, crossing Times Square
with John the Baptist, and they bade me stop;
their hands touched mine:

visions from the belly of a bottle.

The sea, white, white,
the flower in the sea,
the white fire glowing in the flower,
and sea and fire and flower one,
the world is one, falsehood and truth
one, morning and midnight, flesh and vision
one.

I fled along the avenues of night
interminably, and One pursued,

my bruised arms in His arms nursed,
my breast against His wounded breast,
my head limp against His shoulder.

TUMBLING MUSTARD

To H.A.L.

Born in a fence-corner,
raised in a coulee,
married in Nebraska,
parted on the Sound:

They call me Tumbling Mustard, "Hey, Tumbling
Mustard, what's your business, listen Buddy, where
are you bound?"

Monday in Omaha,
Tuesday in Dakota,
one day in Memphis,
three in Allentown:

Mud roads and stony roads, concrete and macadam;
she would never leave me if I would settle down.

Columbine and larkspur,
peony and dahlia,
cornflower, mayflower,
each has a place:

I am the tumble-weed that rolls across the prairies,
winds at the back of it, mountains in its face.

Tumble-weed, tumble-weed,
riding his velocipede
east side, west side,
all around the moon:
Denver, San Francisco, Winnipeg and Dallas, maybe if
the gas holds out we'll get there soon.

MEMPHIS JOHNNY

To N.A.

They carry him off in a one-horse hack,
and he won't be thinking of coming back;

they CARry him off in a ONE-horse hack,
and he WON'T be thinking of COMing back,

may God have mercy upon his soul.
They dump his bones in a six-foot hole;

they shovel dirt on his sullen eyes,
and dirt clump-clumping against his thighs.

The dirt clumps down; the pebbles drum on his belly;
a morsel of sod hides the left nipple of his breast,
and crumbs of gravel seeping into the stiff inter-
stices of his limbs,

and worms crawl out, and worms crawl in,
and worms crawl out, and worms crawl in,

and worms crawl out, and naturally one's condition is
slightly hysterical, and he is wearing such linen as
he never owned, and a suit of decent black, and

glass, oak, metal protecting his body from the soil.
From the worms. And of course it is a natural
delusion to imagine myself beneath the glass and
oak and lead, clutching his shoulders tightly or
pursuing a pointless conversation round and about,

while dirt clump-clumps against my thighs,
against my belly and frozen eyes,

against my shoulders, my breast, my knees,
and shovelfuls of eternities,

and worms crawl in and worms crawl out,
and round and round, and upon, and about,
our pointless conversation grows,
and there she goes,

and there she goes,
and alldressedup in her Sunday clothes —
and there she goes.

THE LADY FROM HARLEM

In Memory of Florence Mills

The fetish-woman crossed the stage,
her limbs convulsed with yellow magic.
Art is the gratuitous
shiver that makes the shimmy tragic.
Obeah, obeah, wailed the saxophones.

Though orchestras play Dixie Dreams,
never in Dixie field was picked
the gun-cotton that swells your breast,
explodes, and leaves me derelict
amid the wreckage of your smile,

floating over the parterre.
Your sudden fingers touched my wrist.
Tell me, did Madam Walker do your hair
before she died in Tarrytown
among her butlers, footmen, chefs?

Throned on a tomb of brass you reign
between the bass and treble clefs.

TOWERS OF SONG

To A.T.

Out of an empty sky, the dust of hours:
a word was spoken and a folk obeyed;
an island uttered incandescent towers,
like frozen simultaneous hymns to Trade.

Here, in a lonely multitude of powers,
thrones, dominations, celestial cavalcade,
they rise
— proclaiming Sea and sky are ours,
and yours, O man, the shadow of our shade.

Or did a poet crazed with dignity
rear them upon an island to prolong
his furious contempt for sky and sea?

To what emaciated hands belong
these index fingers of infinity?

O towers of intolerable song!

THE DEATH OF CROWDS

To P. B.

The earth trembled in all its members,
cracked open to reveal its secret subways;
stones from the cornice shattered at his feet.

Manhattan was destroyed by definition.

There is nothing human in the death of crowds —
human only to climb,
a lone man climbing the highest tower, climbing
along the crazy ledges (he reached the peak
where rose the flagstaff, clasped it with his arms,
and climbed).

Whose laughter floats in the air above the city?
And when the tower bends
like a yellow birch in winter, what the burden
hurled from the summit into the arms of the sun?

TEN GOOD FARMS

To W.S.B.

With rain-washed gulleys marking where the streets
ran riverward in other days; with mounds
of marble, brick and concrete spilt across them,
and crazy girders bridging them, to rust
in the northeast gales;

with towers crumbling in the sunshine, lakes
of peace in every cellar, brambles hiding
the public squares, and underfoot a rat
crossing the stone jungle (the horizon
vast and empty of smoke):

no, in our lifetime we could never make
out of Manhattan Island ten good farms,
or five, or two . . . and yet the open graveyards,
the rich plots where slaughterhouses flourished
and one day fell — our gardens will be there.

BOOK V

OLD MELODIES: LOVE AND DEATH

Poems: 1919-1929

. Michault,
Qui fut nommé le Bon Fouterre:
Priez pour luy, faictes ung sault:
A Saint-Satur gist, soubz Sancerre.

THERE IS A MOMENT

There is a moment after the embrace
when happily fatigued we do not speak,
when still my cheek is resting on your cheek,
when hearts throb still and limbs still interlace

under the coverlet. (Your lips are mild,
timeless and forgiving; your limp hand
rests for a moment on the pillow and
you watch me with the tired face of a child.)

There is a moment logical and white
behind the wall of flesh. It is as if,
falling agreeably from some high cliff,
we floated in a limitless sea of light,

among impersonal forms, and came to rest
within the personal limits of a night,
where chair and bed loom comfortably trite,
where still my heart is beating on your breast.

DEATH

Death is an accumulation of infirmities: hairs fall, a tooth decays, and death; a spot of eczema returns each year with spring; death hides itself in a pimple, a bruise, a sty,

or lurks beside the lips in a parenthesis that deepens no longer; death is rigid, being the achievement of a pattern; death is a finished pattern of wrinkles round the eye.

Having completed some grand work, to die. . . .

Considered abstractly, death is a process of exteriorization: the possible is realized and buried; thought builds a mausoleum for itself; the brain is engraved in granite or a lie.

An apple at bedtime; coffee at nine each morning with two lumps, please, and heavy cream at nine; death is the growth of habits, and we die

at the top first; toes are the last to turn toward the daisies

and eyes the last to stare into the sky.

TIME

The room is dark, he says; nothing is here
except a clock that ticks its heart away,
its brass heart against a nickel breast;
nothing remains of those who come by day,
and dust sifts down upon the bedspread, dust
filters through torn lace curtains, making queer
gratings of light that bar me from the sunset;
tread softly, for the dead are sleeping here.

Twilight. And still the clock
ticks viciously at every second;
the minutes walk
slowly across the field of consciousness;
an hour is a time unreckoned;
precise and categorical,
the seconds hammer on the wall.

At their touch, the flesh disintegrates:
the mind is a cerebrum, a cerebellum,
in tangles like a ball of cotton-waste,
like bundles of dirty linen or bales of shoddy.
The second drip from a great height,
exploding one by one against my nerves,
against the broken armor of my body;
each second is eroding like the rain
its bit of flesh or deliquescent brain.

So perish tyranny! said the Philosopher, seizing his alarm-clock. So perish time! Rolling down the stairs, the clock punctuated his remarks from step to step, as if it were proclaiming that rhythm is the essence of life, life, can I find it, life, said the Philosopher and then

returned to his accustomed place;
the room had grown so dark he could not see,
leaving him out of time and space,
whirled in an eddy of eternity;

and yet his heart beat seventy beats to the minute;
time was drumming at the taut skin of his temples;
time dripped through his veins.

A SOLEMN MUSIC

Play it for me again: a theme repeated
slips insensibly from major into minor,
each chord, each tone, drumming separately
against taut nerves.

I have heard melodies
that stilled the hammer of the heart against
the boxed ribs, that played with caressing hands
along the spine, but theirs is a facile beauty
which you despise, whose long prehensile fingers
grope for expression painfully on the keys.

And there are melodies that assault the body,
entering in at the mouth, the ears, the nose,
the pores beneath the armpits, and having taken
possession of me utterly, burst through
the parchment armor of skin.

Beauty too white,
too perfect for this mind infected with
all the venerealities of sense!
O all-sufficient loveliness:

I cling
vainly to the marble of your flanks,
vainly to the knees of beauty, knowing

before the ecstasy that my clenched fingers
will loose their perilous grip, that I shall fall
awkwardly to adjust myself about
my skeleton.

But play the theme once more,
once more . . . in the pool of sense the ripples widen,
uselessly lap the shores . . . then die away.

WILLIAM WILSON

A man there is of fire and straw
consumed with fire, whom first I saw
once at a dance, where nearer and nearer
there swirled a mist, and lights grew dim,
And I came face to face with him
outlined against me in a mirror,
 my own eyes staring from a mirror.

As red as wine, as white as wine,
his face which is not and is mine
and apes my face's pantomime.

It makes a threatening movement, halts,
and orchestras in perfect time
continue the Blue Danube Waltz,
 heavily dying to a waltz.

He makes a movement and retires,
this man of straw and many fires,
Iago doubled with Othello;
 often I startle up in bed
to find him lying there, my fellow;
 often I wish that he were dead,
and hack him often skin and bone,

and dreaming often, hear my own
life's blood drip on the crumpled pillow,
where once, immortal as a stone,

true love lay strangled by Othello.

STILL LIFE

Upon the table, a great scarred loaf of bread,
a cheese, a napkin checkered white and red,
a glass half-filled, a bottle black with wine,
a deep white china bowl, a tangerine,
a water-bottle bellied like a tun,
an empty cup behind the bottle peeping,
and all of them without a shadow sleeping
under the yellow light of the winter sun.

My glances wander, struggling to align
the yellow cheese, the water-jug, the wine,
the bread, the orange, wishing I were able
to doze beneath the sun, translucent as
the colored liquid sleeping in the glass,
to merely be, like bottles on a table.

WINTER: TWO SONNETS

I

The year swings over slowly, like a pilot
southward now driving from the cold and dark
toward vertical suns and days of briefer twilight
and lights less promptly lighted in the park,

more definite nights, and days more sharply ending.
. . . How shrouded, empty of voice, the streets appear
in these December dusks, their skies distending
till snow falls at the turning of the year.

Only in a dead city one man waking,
who tried to read the city by the glow
of towers feebly luminous and seeking
God in the skies grown suddenly bright with snow,

who listened, till he heard the city speaking
in mortuary whispers to the snow.

II

When little daily winds have died away,
and turkeys climb to roost in the apple tree,
across the snow night creeps so gradually
no eye can mark the cornerstone of day.

Now tightly draw the blinds against the dark
and see in lamplight how the room awakes.
Listen . . . through the tangible silence breaks,
out of the woodlot, a dog-fox's bark.

A creak of rusty hinges in the wind:
his voice was like the rasping of a door,
and when it ceased the darkness instantly

became so hugely silent that behind
a final range of hills we heard the sea
growling with all his voices at the shore.

FOR ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S EVE

(*August 23, 1927*)

Then die!

Outside the prison gawk
the crowds that you will see no more.
A door slams shut behind you. Walk
with turnkeys down a corridor
smelling of lysol, through the gates
to where a drunken sheriff waits.

St. Nicholas who blessed your birth,
whose hands are rich with gifts, will bear
no further gifts to you on earth,
Sacco, whose heart abounds in prayer
neither to Pilate nor a saint
whose earthly sons die innocent.

And you that would not bow your knee
to God, swarthy Bartholomew,
no God will grant you liberty,
nor Virgin intercede for you,
nor bones of yours make sweet the plot
where governors and judges rot.

A doctor sneezes. A chaplain maps
the routes of heaven. You mount the chair.

A jailer buckles tight the straps
like those which aviators wear.
The surgeon makes a signal.

Die!

lost symbols of our liberty.

Beyond the chair, beyond the bars
of day and night, your path lies free;
yours is an avenue of stars:
march on, O dago Christs, while we
march on to spread your name abroad
like ashes in the winds of God.

LEANDER

Un noyé pensif parfois descend.

— Rimbaud

Between the waves, out of the sight of land,
at nightfall toward an unseen beacon swimming;
the sea flung her arms about his arms
in foam, mingled her hair with his
and clung against his breast;
against his lips the salt pulse of the sea.

“Leander, I will show you all my treasures,
caverns of pearl, Leander, constellations
of incandescent fish. Leviathan
my servant shall attend you, and my sharks
surround you in the armies of their splendor,
and octopi shall build a wall of arms:
surrender to the sea.”

The waves that lapped his shoulders cried: surrender,
and dead men's bones a thousand fathoms under
called in their sterner voices: O Leander,
surrender. . . .

He lingered to the rhythm of the waves,
a last time felt the rain against his cheek,
then slowly filled his lungs with water, sank

through immense halls of darkness, infinite
chambers of dream, a white thing that drifts
southward with the current, a cold body
whittled by the sea.

And Hero

waiting in her desolate chamber, Hero
be comforted;

for they have taken the dead whose flesh you loved
and dressed him in the plunder of the sea;
his hair is wreathed with algae; his eyes gleam
luminous with jellyfishes; coral
blooms on his thighs; his arms are braceleted
with pearl, and scars of kisses on his breast.

Regal and tired, O corpse that mapped the countries
of ocean, saw pelagic meadows where
the sea-cow grazes, traveller who skirts
the unicellular gardens of the foam —

southward you drift, where archipelagoes
of stars deflect the current, and waters boil
with lava, through indefinite Marquesas,
spinning in the typhoon, and off Cape Stiff
in westerly gales your eyes commemorate,
still tropical, the wax and wane of moons.
Time is a secret frozen in your smile.

THE STREETS OF AIR

All night waiting in an empty house
under dry electric moons, they cast
no shadow, a man striding impatiently,
sucking a cold pipe, waiting,
an empty sacrificial vessel waiting
without patience to be filled with God.

He said,

“There was a scratching at the door,
the noise of some one fingering the latch,
once, but I opened and only found the night
empty of sound, empty.”

The images of drouth
in a desert growing, acacias in the sand
with thorns and thornlike leaves that cast no shadow,
dry leaves silently moving in the sun.

A wall rose there, of hewn enormous stones
laid without mortar, and a gateway barred,
and skies closed in.

But you shall hear the thunder
of bursting walls; the gates of night swing wide,
and journeys will be set against the sunrise;
your path shall be the empty streets of air.

THE URN

Wanderers outside the gates, in hollow
landscapes without memory, we carry
each of us an urn of native soil,
of not impalpable dust a double handful

carelessly gathered (was it garden mould,
or wood-soil fresh with hemlock needles, pine
and princess pine, this little earth we bore
in secret, vainly, over the frontier?)

A parcel of the soil not wide enough
or firm enough to build a dwelling on,
or deep enough to dig a grave, but cool
and sweet enough to sink the nostrils in
and find the smell of home, or in the ears
rumors of home like oceans in a shell.

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M. C.

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